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# The Role of Rural School Leaders in a School-Community Partnership

Sarah J. Zuckerman, *University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Rural schools play central roles in their communities, and rural education scholars advocate for rural school-community partnerships to support school and community renewal. Across the United States, including in rural areas, formal models for school-community partnerships have been scaled up. The literature on rural principals highlights their roles in developing school-community partnerships, yet questions remain as to how school leaders engage in such partnerships. Using boundary-spanning leadership as a theoretical lens, this descriptive study examines the role of district and school leaders in a regional school-community partnership, including as founding members, champions of collaboration, cheerleaders for the partnership, and amplifiers of often excluded voices.

**Keywords:** boundary-spanning, rural schools, school-community partnerships, school leaders

Rural schools play a central role in their communities (Lyson, 2002; Tieken, 2014). Rural education scholars have advocated for school-community partnerships as a means to reverse population loss and economic decline, as well as to generate educational and community renewal, resilience, and vitality (Bauch, 2001; Casto, McGrath, Sipple, & Todd, 2016; Cheshire, Esparcia, & Shucksmith, 2015; Schafft, 2016). School-community partnerships bring community resources into schools and in turn influence agencies and organizations that serve children and families, helping create alignment between spheres of influence over child development. Active leadership at the district and the school supports the development of school-community partnerships (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011).

School-community partnerships also serve as spaces for school leaders to engage with voices outside of traditional academic discourse (Miller, 2008). These partnerships create social frontiers or the places where people of various backgrounds come together to interact in purposeful ways (Miller,

Scanlan, & Phillippo, 2017). To be effective, school-community partnerships require “social interactions, mutual trust, and relationships that promote agency within a community” (Bauch, 2001, p. 205) and “the development of a set of social relationships within and between the school and its local community that promote action” for the “common good” (p. 208). Social relationships support the collective processes of sense making that work to identify and define the common good and agreed-on actions to create it (Zuckerman, 2019). Miller’s (2007, 2008) work on boundary spanning provides a theoretical lens for understanding how school leaders connect group members, serve as information brokers, and bring legitimacy and credibility to partnership efforts. Previous research suggests rural school leaders can play key roles in such partnerships by recognizing the interdependence of school and community (Budge, 2006). When they engage in relational, collaborative, and place-conscious leadership, rural school leaders can support community development by contributing to “the collective capacity of people to work together, determining and acting in a community’s best

interest” (Schafft, 2016, p. 144) that supports community development. In this way, school leaders serve as conduits and bridge builders between school and community, creating social networks that support rural schools (Miller, 2007; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Likewise, Harmon and Schafft (2009) advocated for rural school leadership that engages in collaborative actions for community development. Miller (2007) suggests that school leaders can do so with diverse stakeholders through clear and regular communication, as well as the creation of coalitions around common goals. In rural communities, school leaders’ central position and close-knit relationships (Preston & Barnes, 2017) can facilitate coalition building.

However, Miller’s (2007, 2008) boundary-spanning leadership theory derives from urban contexts, and the suggestions of Harmon and Schafft (2009) have not yet been fully investigated. Given the renewed focus on school-community partnerships (Bauch, 2001; Henig, Riehl, Houston, Rebell, & Wolff, 2016; Henig, Riehl, Rebell, & Wolff, 2015) and collaboration as a means for rural school renewal (e.g., Harmon, 2017; Hartman, 2017; Preston & Barnes, 2017), this study provides a timely examination of the roles real-world school leaders played in the creation of a school-community partnership. This exploratory and descriptive case study answers this call by examining the roles of six school leaders who were active in a regional school-community partnership across eight school districts in an area of the Upper Midwest: a superintendent, three principals, a school board member, and an after-school program director. This analysis draws primarily on interviews with these school leaders, as well as approximately 35 additional Network members and backbone organization staff that took part in interviews and focus groups, as well as observations, and document collection. This study was guided by the following research questions: What roles do school leaders play in a regional school-community partnership? How do they engage in boundary-spanning leadership as part of a regional school-community partnership?

## Literature Review

This review of the literature on rural school leaders and rural school-community partnerships provides context for the current study. It also introduces the StriveTogether Theory of Action, which guided the school-community partnership selected for this study.

### Rural School Leadership

Rural school leaders encounter challenges in the many roles they must play in smaller schools and districts. With fewer teachers, administrators, and support staff, rural school leaders play many roles, including classroom teaching and instructional leadership, along with managerial and maintenance tasks (Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013). The small size of rural schools can create tensions in relationships with teachers, particularly around classroom observations and instructional improvement. Additionally, rural school leaders are tasked with serving as change agents, balancing policy demand and the needs of local communities (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Yet meeting the needs of the local community is challenged by fragmentation along class, race, and political lines, creating competing values around the purposes of schooling (Howley & Howley, 2010; McHenry-Sorber, 2014; Surface & Theobald, 2014). In regional partnerships that bring together members of multiple communities, these tensions are joined by differences in identity (Zuckerman, 2019). In balancing needs and serving as change agents, rural principals face significant scrutiny from communities, as well as personal and professional isolation (Preston et al., 2013; Zuckerman, n.d.). Likewise, rural principals face tensions between the needs of local communities and external policy mandates, such as the college and career readiness focus embedded in the Common Core state standards (Freeman, 2014) and other recent accountability measures.

However, rural schools and communities offer strengths for education. Preston and Barnes (2017) identified people-centered leadership as a key theme in the research on rural principals, including collaboration with multiple stakeholders. Owing to the small size of rural schools, principals are better able to build trust among staff, promote teamwork,

and support student achievement (Chance & Segura, 2009; Irvine, Lupart, Loreman, & McGhie-Richmond, 2010; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Effective rural school leadership depends in part on working closely with parent and other groups to engage in improvement efforts within the school (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Irvine et al., 2010).

Additionally, the smaller size of schools and communities facilitates personal relationships between school leaders and students and their families, allowing them to create a more personalized learning environment (Preston & Barnes, 2017). One way school leaders can engage with community members and create two-way relationships with community members is through opening of school space for community activities (Preston & Barnes, 2017). This work is facilitated by what Surface and Theobald (2015) call the blurry boundary between rural schools and communities. For example, rural school leaders are often active citizens in the community through participation in church and other community activities, such as coaching youth sports (Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra, & Angelidou, 2011; Zuckerman, O'Shea, Pace, & Meyer, n.d.). These relationships both within and beyond the school walls provide social capital that can support schools and student achievement by increasing learning opportunities (Agnitsch, Flora, & Ryan, 2009; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Such social capital has been identified as a key factor in creating partnerships between rural schools and communities (Budge, 2006). In this way, rural school leaders play boundary-spanning roles by engaging in relationships and communication inside and beyond the school walls (Miller, 2007; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

However, much literature on rural school leadership focuses on individual schools and their local communities. School consolidation has increased the number of individual communities served by rural schools and limited the availability of social networks for parents and children alike (Sherman & Sage, 2011). Further, the regional nature of social service provision suggests rural school leaders may need to engage in boundary-spanning leadership across larger social and geographic distances, such as those involved in the

regional school-community partnership that is the focus of the current study.

### **Rural School-Community Partnerships**

The literature on rural school leaders highlights connecting with communities. One way they can do this is through formal and informal school-community partnerships. Melaville (1998) defines school-community partnerships as "intentional efforts to create and sustain relationships among a K-12 school or school district and a variety of both formal and informal organization in the community" (p. 6). In rural areas, school-community partnerships have been viewed as an antidote to the urban-centric school reform that shifted from local control to distant experts during the twentieth century (Bauch, 2001; Jennings, 1999).

In part, school-community partnerships shift control back to the local level for school renewal by focusing on local goals and needs for education (Bauch, 2001). Rural education scholars have argued that partnerships between schools and their communities contribute to school reform and community development (Bauch, 2001; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Schafft, 2016). By recognizing the interdependence of school and community (Budge, 2006), rural school leaders can contribute to community development, or "the collective capacity of people to work together, determining and acting in a community's best interest" (Schafft, 2016, p. 144). Further, these partnerships can help school leaders meet the educational needs of local communities (Schafft, 2016).

Bauch (2001) identified six types of school and community relationships: social capital, sense of place, parent involvement, church ties, school-business-agency partnerships, and the community as a curricular resource. Newer models may include some or all of these, as well as additional elements, such as early childhood, postsecondary education, and social service agencies (Zuckerman, 2016b; Lawson, 2013). These partnerships include homegrown, grassroots efforts (e.g., Biddle, Mette, & Mercado, 2018; Casto, 2016) and those that rely on models imported from urban areas (e.g., Miller, Wills, & Scanlan, 2013; Zuckerman, 2019). These models have been referred to as next-generation school-community partnerships (Lawson, 2013) and

include branded national networks, such as Promise Neighborhoods and StriveTogether. These models bring together community and regional stakeholders in education, health, mental health, and social welfare to support children and families inside and outside of school (Lawson, 2013).

The spread of these next-generation models for school-community partnerships, particularly those that originated in urban places, raises questions about their adaptation to rural places and to what degree they truly consider a sense of place that supports both schools and communities (Zuckerman, 2019). These considerations are particularly important given that models such as StriveTogether use the same neoliberal rhetoric of college and career readiness as federal policies that potentially threaten rural communities by placing global economic needs over those of the community (Casto et al., 2016; Freeman, 2014; Schafft & Biddle, 2013; Zuckerman, 2016c). Casto and colleagues (2016) criticize such models as taking a thin approach to human development by prioritizing individual achievement at the expense of community development. Partnerships engaging such approaches may exacerbate the outmigration of rural youth identified by Corbett (2007) and Carr and Kefalas (2009), thus diminishing the capacity of rural communities to adapt to changing economic, political, and social conditions (Cheshire et al., 2015), rather than contributing to rural community development.

Instead, Casto and colleagues (2016) argue that place-based school-community partnerships should be based on a “thick” conception of human need that includes place, shared identity, and relationships. However, to engage in a thick conception of human need in a national model, rural community members must engage critically with such models through sense making to tailor them to their needs, including increasing pathways to employment in the local community, increasing opportunities for positive youth development and cross-generational relationships, and including youth voice (Zuckerman, 2019; Zuckerman & McAtee, 2018).

However, complex partnerships require vertical and horizontal relationships (Casto, 2016). For

school leaders, time and resources limit the ability to collaborate on the school side. A fewer potential partners on the community side further limit school-community partnerships, necessitating some partnerships beyond the local community (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Yet the isolation of the community creates challenges in collaborating with other groups. Casto (2016) noted that these partnerships were not always mutually beneficial and seen as “just one more thing I have to do” (p. 159). This study examined the role of school leaders in the development of a school-community partnership that encompasses eight districts in a rural region, increasing the vertical connections for boundary-spanning leadership. This partnership drew on the StriveTogether Theory of Action, described in the next section, while also focusing on place, local needs, and relationships (Zuckerman, 2019).

### **StriveTogether Theory of Action for School-Community Partnerships**

While much of the literature on rural school-community partnerships focuses on homegrown efforts, there is a movement across the United States to scale up proven models. One such model is the StriveTogether Theory of Action, derived from the StrivePartnership, a place-based school-community partnership in Cincinnati, Ohio (Henig et al., 2015). The StrivePartnership grew from the recognition that isolated efforts would continue to be insufficient for creating a complete workforce and that workforce development begins in early childhood, not just in high school and college (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Henig et al., 2015). Between 2006 and 2014, a sense of urgency mobilized 300 organizational members in three school districts around a shared vision for change (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014). This vision consists of four pillars: (1) a shared vision of student success; (2) goals, metrics, and indicators aligned to that vision; (3) data systems to collect and analyze student-level data on those metrics across organizations; and (4) strong, sustained, cross-sector civic leadership supported by a backbone organization.

In 2011, key leaders of the original group formed the StriveTogether Cradle to Career



Network to scale up implementation of this vision for change by providing tools and processes that can be adapted to local communities (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Henig et al., 2015). These include the Student Roadmap to Success and the StriveTogether Theory of Action (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; StriveTogether, 2019). The Student Roadmap to Success outlines six research-based indicators of educational success: kindergarten readiness; student support inside and outside school; academic support, particularly for fourth-grade literacy and eighth-grade algebra; boosting high school completion; college enrollment; and college completion (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; StriveTogether, 2013).

The StriveTogether Theory of Action outlines developmental stages across the four pillars listed above, providing measurable benchmarks from “emerging” to “systems change” (StriveTogether, 2019, p. 2). For example, the emerging phase includes the development of a leadership table with a clear accountability structure; calls to action to mobilize partners; developing locally defined, evidence-based priorities; the collection and public release of baseline data; commitment to continuous improvement; mapping of community assets; and selection of a backbone organization and communication strategies (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; StriveTogether, 2019). Further development includes partnership agreements that define roles and responsibilities of members, sharing of data, the development of collaborative action networks to carry out collaborative efforts at multiple levels, and funding commitments to support facilitators, data management, and backbone organization staff (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012). This document outlines the steps StriveTogether believes can lead to systems-level changes across multiple sectors.

StriveTogether-affiliated partnerships were identified for the original case study due to efforts to scale up the model in rural places, including the state where the researcher resided during data collection. The analysis presented here focuses on the roles played by several school and district leaders in a rural school-community partnership. To date, the literature on StriveTogether does not provide a clear understanding of the role of school

leaders, and there is limited knowledge of how these partnerships translate to rural contexts. This article is the final in a series that has examined a StriveTogether-affiliated partnership in a rural context, including mobilization of stakeholders (Zuckerman, 2016a), the role of youth voices in this partnership (Zuckerman & McAtee, 2018), and how members made sense of local knowledge and knowledge of the StriveTogether model to adapt it to their context (Zuckerman, 2019).

### Theoretical Framework

While rural schools often serve as centers of communities, collaboration with cross-sector organizational partners requires principals and superintendents to engage in boundary-spanning leadership (Miller, 2008). Organizations create boundaries by delineating the services they provide and the clients they serve (Goldring, 1996). In addition to these boundaries, individuals working within organizations have been socialized into their professions, with different approaches to problem solving, different language for describing problems, and different means of defining progress (Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997). Likewise, social groups create boundaries that need to be crossed to engage in school-community partnerships (Biddle et al., 2018). These boundaries create challenges for even the most skilled school leaders in working within social, organizational, and professional contexts different from their own (Miller, 2008). Previous research suggests that when school leaders act across boundaries they can engage in educational and social transformation (Driscoll & Goldring, 2002; Miller 2008; Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

This study draws on the theoretical framework of boundary-spanning leadership for community partnerships developed by Miller (2008), which describes eight characteristics of boundary-spanning leadership, each described briefly below.

1. *Social contacts*: Includes personal and professional contacts developed through years of engagement in the community. These contacts contribute to social capital. Wide varieties of social contacts are necessary for partnerships seeking to incorporate diverse perspectives.

2. *Trust*: Trust and respect among partners contribute to collaboration by supporting shared understandings and credible leadership.
3. *Interpersonal skills*: These skills include building relationships with a variety of individuals and a capacity to lead without being overly directive.
4. *Mobilize diverse partners*: Boundary-spanning leaders bring diverse partners to the table and work to overcome potential of intragroup misconceptions.
5. *Collect and disseminate information*: Collect and share relevant information and share with those that need it; keep everyone in the loop without burying them in minutia.
6. *Understand and appreciate complexity*: Tacit knowledge of social and organizational environments. Value many kinds of knowledge; understand how to get things done in different contexts.
7. *Mobilize groups around a common cause*: Develop purposeful, productive working relationships between partners and bring together disparate perspectives to address common needs.
8. *Flexibility and autonomy*: Engage with a wide range of constituents across organizations without organizational and political limits.

For rural principals, some of these characteristics may come as part of the job, such as diverse social contacts developed through years in the community, trust with community members, and developing interpersonal skills that support collaboration. However, others such as navigating complex social and organizational environments, mobilizing diverse stakeholders, and bringing together diverse views around common needs may not come with the territory of rural school leadership. Likewise, the flexibility and autonomy to move between settings may be severely limited by the many hats rural school leaders wear within their own buildings (Preston et al., 2013).

## Methods

The larger study from which this analysis derives used a qualitative case study design that included interviews and focus groups with members of the Grand Isle Network (explained below), document collection, and observations of two key meetings. Case study was selected because it provides tools to examine phenomena that cannot easily be separated from context (Yin, 2014), such as place-based school-community partnerships that must be fitted for purpose, place, and time to be successful (Lawson, 2013). Case study also offers tools for answering *how* questions (Yin, 2014), such as how partnerships develop and operate.

## Positionality Statement

The researcher occupied an outsider perspective in this case study, although a knowledgeable one informed by her experiences living and teaching elementary school in rural communities, including one similar to that identified in this study. The researcher also attended college in the state where this study took place, which helped create rapport with study participants. Additionally, she served as a graduate assistant on a multiple-case study of high-performing schools, focusing data collection and analysis on rural schools and their leaders. At the time of data collection, the researcher was enrolled in a doctoral program in school leadership and had recently completed the internship required for principal candidates. These experiences allowed the research to build rapport with study participants during data collection. Since then, she has taken a position teaching aspiring principals and superintendents in another, predominantly rural state, where she continues to research school-community partnerships and rural school leadership. This secondary analysis was suggested in the initial data analysis, as well as by the researcher's intersecting interests in preparing rural school and district leaders and furthering school-community partnerships in rural places.

## Case Selection

Sampling focused on partnerships affiliated with the StriveTogether Network due to its national prominence at the time of the initial study, as well as

explicit efforts to scale up this model in the state where the researcher lived. This included the creating of an office within the state university system to provide technical support to partnerships using the StriveTogether Theory of Action across the state. Purposive sampling began with the publicly available list of StriveTogether-affiliated partnerships. These partnerships had completed a voluntary checklist that aligned with the developmental model of Strive, from emerging through proof point. This list was then cross-checked with county-level and school-level data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013) to identify a partnership in a nonmetropolitan county that served at least two rural schools. Two sites were originally identified, one in the Upper Midwest and one in the Northeast. Both were listed in the initial, “exploring” phase of the StriveTogether process. This includes the mobilization of stakeholders around a compelling need and commitment to a vision that extends from birth through entry into the workforce; the use of local data to identify areas of need; the development of a leadership table; a call to action; the creation of a report card; mapping of community assets and a commitment to continuous improvement processes; the identification of a backbone organization, or anchor entity, to provide logistical support; and the engagement of philanthropy (StriveTogether, 2019).

Because the guiding framework for the original study focused on civic capacity, or the mobilization of stakeholders around a common agenda (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001), it was important to select a partnership in which stakeholders had mobilized, developed shared goals, and were moving to community-level change. To assess the development of each site, the researcher spoke with the conveners of each partnership, who served as gatekeepers. In these conversations, one partnership appeared to be at the cusp of the next phase: emerging. This was evident in the planning of an event to present the first, baseline report card data to the public, which would also serve as a call to action to the public. As this site was moving toward action, it was selected to maximize what could be learned from a single, successful case (Stake, 1995). The convener

agreed to participate and facilitate introductions to members.

This partnership, the Grand Isle Network (the Network),<sup>1</sup> brings together eight school districts across a large rural county<sup>2</sup> and portions of neighboring counties that are understood by residents as the greater Grand Isle area. In the past, extractive industries, including logging and mining, dominated the local economy. Today, growing economic sectors include health care, tourism, and services. The sparsity of population, approximately 20 individuals per square mile, creates challenges to bringing partners together, as do differences in values, beliefs, and identifies in the 30 towns and villages within the Network’s boundaries. However, participants reported that a key strength of the area is the ability to work together, demonstrated by a 20-year-old school collaborative, the Grand Isle School Collaborative (GISC), and an early childhood collaborative, an early childhood program, which since the mid-1990s has been a collaborative effort among the school districts, Head Start, and the regional Department of Health agency. Additionally, Grand Isle is home to the Grand Isle Foundation (the Foundation), a private foundation dedicated to improving the lives of local residents and those in rural areas across the state. The Foundation served as a backbone organization during the first 5 years of the Network’s development, providing logistical support, leadership, and facilitation of meetings.

### Data Collection

Data collection occurred over two weeklong visits to the site and included interviews and focus groups with network members, observations of meetings, and document collection. The first weeklong visit was scheduled so the researcher could observe the report-card release event, and the second, so the researcher could observe a key meeting of the steering committee. Observations attended to events and dialogue among participants. To identify participants for interviews and focus groups, criterion sampling was used based on active membership, stakeholder type, and school district, to recruit a diverse group of participants. Because the Network spans eight school districts, efforts were made to recruit members from each of these districts; however,



because many members lived and worked in the population center, this was challenging. The final interview sample included participants from three districts, Winslow, Green Lake, and Big River, which includes schools in both the largest community and the more remote Little River K-12 campus.

Interviews were guided by a semistructured protocol<sup>3</sup> to assure similar data were collected across participants while allowing for individuals' thinking to be probed (Neuman, 2011). First-round interview protocols were designed to focus on members' understanding of the mobilization of stakeholders, the creation of shared goals, and the Network's theory of action. Additionally, participants were asked to describe their communities, particularly the opportunities and aspirations for young people. Two focus groups were held during the first site visit, which brought together members of working groups, including an after-school group and a workforce development group. These interviews were guided by similar protocols.

The second round of interviews focused on the transition to action, including community action groups that formed at the school level. During this site visit, focus groups were conducted by one of the

consultants working with the Network. The consultant and researcher communicated via email about the protocol questions, which were similar to the interview questions in that they addressed the Network's transition to action at the school level. The inclusion of these focus groups in the research prevented them from having to answer the same questions twice. The purpose of these focus groups was explained to all members, and informed consent was gained. The research independently recorded and transcribed the focus groups. Although the presence of the consultant could have influenced how forthcoming members were, this did not appear to be the case, as the consultant had worked with the Network for several years and was familiar to members. The analysis presented here draws on interviews with six school and district leaders, along with 35 additional Network members and backbone organization staff that participated in 28 interviews and six focus groups. Additionally, data from meeting observations and blog posts provided triangulation. Table 1 provides information about each of these six leaders and their district using National Center for Education Statistics data accessed via the school search database (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

**Table 1**  
*Participant Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Role	School/ district	NCES locale	District enrollment	FRPL%
Michael	Superintendent	Winslow	Rural distant	950	70%
Drew	After-school director	Winslow HS, Winslow	Rural distant	950	70%
Greg	Principal	Green Lake Secondary, Green Lake(5–12)	Rural fringe	1,000	50%
Steve	Principal	Little River Secondary (7–12), Big River	Rural remote	250	50%
Hal	Principal	Big River High School, Big River	Town remote	4,000	50%
Mark	School board member	Big River	Town remote	4,000	50%

NCES, National Center for Education Statistics (2014); FRPL, free or reduced-price lunch.

## Data Analysis

All interview and focus group transcripts, along with meeting observation notes and documents, were uploaded in an NVivo database. For the initial case study, data analysis proceeded through an a priori coding scheme developed from a literature review on cradle-to-career networks and a conceptual framework of civic capacity, which describes mobilization of key stakeholders and the development of shared issue frames to drive community-level change (Stone et al., 2001). Examples of these codes include the parent code “mobilization” under which the child codes were created for “invitation” and engagement. Coding at this stage also included inductive coding to address concepts not identified in the literature review. These codes included “rural identity,” which was an important concept for participants living in a rugged region dominated by lakes, forests, and mountains. Identity was also identified in how participants described the differences among the eight school districts. From this coding, leadership, and the various roles members played, was identified as an important factor in the development of the Network, which suggested further analysis of the roles played by school leaders in particular.

For this study, a narrative approach was taken to the data analysis using both within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006), shifting the focus from the Network to each school leader as a case. The interview transcripts for each of the school leaders were read through several times. The researcher then wrote narratives to tell a story about each school leader and his role in the Network, moving from “elements to stories” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). These narratives created stories of each school leader's engagement in the Network. This allowed for their actions in the Network to be described in a more chronological fashion, as well as embedding them within the context of their schools and communities. Additional details were pulled from other interviews, observations, and documents to flesh out the stories and the roles played by each administrator. These narratives were then read for similarities and differences (Stake, 2006) to advance “from stories to common elements” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12).

## Findings

The original founding members of the Network included district and school leaders from across the eight component districts. Three principals, a superintendent, a school board member, and an after-school program director agreed to participate in this study. These school leaders served as champions for the Network within their organization, aligning activities in their school or district to the Network's goals, serving as cheerleaders in the wider community to mobilize stakeholders to the Network's vision, and amplifying the voices of youth. The narratives revealed that they each played somewhat different roles based on the institutional constraints of their positions.

### Founding Members

The superintendent of the rural Winslow district, the principals of Big River, Little River, and Green Lake high schools, and the Winslow after-school director all served as founding members of the Network. As founding members, they engaged with members of communities across the Network and with members of organizations in the region after initial conversations within school district leadership indicated a need to look more broadly at the issue of student achievement. The GISC superintendents began to meet with Foundation leadership to discuss education and the convergence of their interests, which in turn led to conversations about more “intensive and intentional partnership” efforts. A Foundation member attributed the start of the Network to “that core of superintendents who were willing to step out and take a risk, you know, to try to trust each other. Then they had to go back to their staffs and their boards, a lot of skepticism that they had to overcome.” This Foundation member particularly identified Michael, superintendent of Winslow district, as “one of the original voices” for the Network and reported he bears “a really heavy load right now, keeping the flame alive, helping newcomers understand and see their self-interest in this.” Likewise, he was among the most frequently suggested individuals to talk to about the Network.

During the initial phase, which involved a series of community conversations, an intentional cross-section of community members in each district were

invited to participate, among them principals and superintendents. These community members engaged in iterative discussions about the state of education in the region and their hopes for the future. At the end of the third meeting, the facilitators issued a call for individuals to step forward as leaders for the initial plan that came out of the iterative series of meetings. Approximately 40 individuals stepped up as members of the core team, among them the principal of Big River High School, the principal of Little River High School, the superintendent of Winslow, and the after-school director at Winslow.

When asked why he joined the Network, Hal, the principal of Big River High School, stated he was invited by a Foundation member through his participation in the earlier GISC conversations. He stated that, for himself, he did not feel a sense of distrust in joining a community network but that he thought there was hesitancy among schools to get involved due to the tendency to blame schools and the tendency for outsiders to propose quick fixes without knowledge of the system. He stated the need to develop trust in the collaborative: "Once the school district sees that these people aren't attacking us and that they really truly want to help, it's overcome." He also reported that the Network's commitment not to add to the burden of schools facilitated their continued participation. Likewise, one of the conveners reported that school leaders began to get involved once the conversations in the nascent Network shifted from what one of the conveners described as the "No Child Left Behind rhetoric of failing schools," to the need to engage the community to support youth. This shift appeared to be an important one that allowed school leaders to engage more deeply in the work.

In their role as founding members, these school leaders took part in the development of the Network. The superintendent of Winslow, Michael, reported traveling to Cincinnati as part of a study group to visit with the original Strive Partnership group. Following this trip, the Network conveners facilitated a conversation among the Network members, who then shared their learning with the rest of the core team. Principals, on the other hand, reported that they could not get away from their schools for this trip but engaged in efforts closer to home, including

the development of the Network's pathway outlining their aspirations. The Little River Secondary principal, Steve, reported the pathway development was a "long, long process, strategic planning type sessions, trying to hear everyone's voice at the table." He described these facilitated conversations as a place to get ideas out "in a brainstorming type environment that doesn't create boundary lines or turf protection." For him, this process highlighted that schools do a good job with most students, but for those who don't fit in "that box," schools need outside support.

Several of these founding members played additional roles in the Network. Steve reported serving on the communications committee that shares information with the wider community. Drew, the after-school director of Winslow, was also a member of an after-school network of providers. This group was engaged in increasing their offerings and access to them for low-income and more remote students, as well as using grant funds to assess the quality of their programming. The superintendent of Winslow, Michael, reported that, based on his previous leadership experience in the school collaborative and an early childhood collaborative, he was asked to serve on the governance council. This smaller leadership team took over from the core team to provide more accountable direction as the Network matured. Michael attributed his ability to take on a larger leadership role to the flexibility of his time as a superintendent, compared to principals and teachers.

### **Network Champions**

In addition to contributing to the formation of the Network, school and district leaders engaged in leadership on behalf of the Network. One way they did so was through championing the Network's goals within their own settings. This was most evident at Winslow, where both the superintendent and the after-school director made efforts to align their work in the district with the Network's goals. This included securing grant funding for anti-substance abuse programming that allowed youth to plan activities at the high school after sporting events. Michael, the superintendent, also reported working with the board to support the priorities of

early childhood education, including increasing the number of early childhood classrooms in the district. According to participants, Winslow was the only district in the Network that had enough early childhood spaces for all who wanted to send their children.

The alignment to Network goals also was evident in the partnership between the district and the Boys and Girls Club to provide a 5-day per week after-school program in partnership with 4-H and other organizations. This effort was supported by the school board, which provided a late bus to allow students to participate, regardless of their parents' ability to provide transportation. The alignment to the Network's goals also included a summer program that included remediation and enrichment. A member of the after-school network attributed the success of this program to the support of the superintendent, who was described as "fully behind it," as well as a "mover and shaker" who can accomplish things and is "passionate about moving [after-school] to the next level." In a focus group with the after-school network members, there was consensus that superintendents need to "fully support" efforts to create 5-day per week after-school programs in each school.

Other efforts to bring the Network's goals into schools included the pathway document prominently displayed in the conference room where the interview with the Little River Secondary principal took place. At Green Lake Secondary, alignment to the Network's goals included bringing in retired community members as greeters 1 day each week, which its principal, Greg, reported as a means to facilitate intergenerational understanding, respect, and trust, as well as making school a more welcoming place. Additionally, Greg and two other secondary principals reported efforts to partner with local colleges to offer students a head start on coursework or entering the workforce with a certificate.

However, there appeared to be fewer initiatives aligned with the Network in their districts. One member of the after-school network attributed this to the priorities of the previous and interim superintendents in the Big River district, the largest by enrollment. This interviewee expressed hope

that the next superintendent would embrace the goals of the Network. Others noted the importance of having a superintendent on board to champion the Network's goals in their district and "drive the engine." Michael highlighted his ability to do this through the "latitude about where I'm investing my time," while principals have less flexibility. Further, he stated that, while all of the school leaders supported the goals of the Network, each district had a different level of readiness to engage in efforts aligned to those goals, from funding to data analysis capacity. In part, Michael attributed this to the pressures of school accountability: "If [schools] aren't making annual yearly progress in reading, they're going to spend a lot of time focusing on reading data because they're in DEFCON mode."

School board member Mark also served as a champion. In his previous role as county sheriff, he had been involved in the Network, stating that in his 33 years of law enforcement, "kids have always been my focus." He reported becoming more involved after being elected to the Big River school board. He reported there was a need for prevention in areas such as drug abuse and law enforcement. In this role, he described reaching out to community members to help them understand the importance of education in the community and their stake in it. He reported using the message that "we all pay taxes. We all want to do well. We want our kids to do well. But we need your input on that. Because you have a stake in this." In particular, he reported bringing this message to people who do not have children in the schools, relaying this pitch: "You help educate kids through your tax dollars; it might be that individual that might be your doctor or your auto mechanic or the person who is working on your house. So really, you do have a stake in this." Mark reported people "perk up, their interest is there," when the message was framed that way.

### **Cheerleaders**

In addition to serving as champions of the Network's agenda in their own district, several school leaders served as cheerleaders in the greater community by engaging in motivational framing activities (Zuckerman, 2016a). This included speaking at the community data launch event. From the stage, in front of tables of youths

and adults from across the region, after-school director Drew spoke emotionally about bringing people together around the vision of the Network and being passionate about building relationships and supporting students. Looking out at the nearly 200 adults and youths in the room, he said, "It takes a village to raise our youth. I'm glad the village is here."

Similarly, at this event Michael, superintendent of the Winslow district, emphasized the need to support academics with relationships. He spoke about research that identifies the need for "academic press," or high student expectations, to be supported by a productive climate in which schools and communities are connected and engaged "on all cylinders." In part, his ability to mobilize community members to the Network's goals may have depended on his expertise and his legitimacy in Winslow and the wider region. At the time of data collection, Michael had been superintendent for 8 years, and he had previously served as the high school principal in Winslow. His leadership in the region was evident in his position as the chair of the school collaboration that preceded the Network, as well as serving on local and state-level boards related to after-school and early childhood programs. Michael's leadership in the region and state suggests legitimacy, as well as broad professional networks that can facilitate the sharing of information, knowledge, and ideas (Miller et al., 2017).

### **Amplifiers for Youth and Other Voices**

Lastly, school leaders engaged in boundary-spanning leadership by amplifying the voices of those who frequently hold little power in school improvement. This included efforts to amplify youth voices as an important contribution to the Network. In particular, Drew called attention to the importance of youth voice in developing after-school activities. In a blog post, he wrote:

In my opinion, the best way to get teens to attend out of school time programming is to ask them what they want, when they want it and let them plan it. They build valuable skills by planning and implementing their own programming, no matter the content of the programming.

After-school director Drew reiterated this in a focus group, stating he wanted youths to plan activities while adults find ways to pay for them. His commitment to allowing youths to plan activities was also evident in his description of the "Fifth Quarter" activities that provide students with an alternative to drinking after sporting events. He described, campfires, movie nights, and "zombie tag" with flashlights in the dark school hallways. He gave the impression he was amenable to whatever the youths planned as long they were in a safe space. In this way, he crossed intergenerational boundaries to support those who normally lack power in education.

His support of those who are disadvantaged was also evident in the way Drew brought together students to create an action plan for Winslow High School using their survey data. He reported intentionally reaching out to teachers and club leaders to recruit youth from more challenging backgrounds, those he described as struggling to "maintain connections because I just think in the past they've been let down a lot." He continued, noting how important their participation was:

But I feel like when they were part of this process, they were both super. They seemed like they were surprised that anybody would even ask for their opinion on something, you know those were my favorite two and they had a lot of the best answers too, so that was really neat to see kids from that—I don't know, they normally wouldn't have been selected for something like that I think. And they've offered a lot of great input.

The Green Lake Secondary principal, Greg, likewise served as a "proponent of student voice," as he described himself, both in his school and in the Network as a whole. At Green Lake, this included supporting an antibullying group started by a student with special needs. Greg connected the need for this to the recent suicides by three graduates of their school, as well as three suicide attempts from current students. He described the work of this student group, including securing a small grant for a movie and food: "Those kids that were in [that] group kind of they ran that whole night. And it was just really empowering and neat to see



them do that.” Like Drew, Greg reported working to recruit students who are not the usual suspects for action planning, to develop their leadership abilities.

Other school leaders championed the inclusion of parents who are not typically engaged in schools. For example, the Little River principal, Steve, reported a need to engage these parents: “That is one of the areas that we’re looking to improve. Just like student voice. And the, I think strategies do need to be developed because it’s not going to happen by invitation or natural interactions.” Here he appeared to be identifying the limit of social networks in the rural communities in the Network, which others identified as excluding low-income residents. To meet these parents, he suggested meetings after work hours and helping them see the benefit of the work. Others suggested helping parents with stipends to pay for gas, recognizing the large distances many would have to travel to participate in school events and Network meetings.

Additionally, Michael championed the inclusion of principals in the Network in order to be able to create change in the schools. He stated, “I think the principals are key to creating that change,” and continued, “I think if we’re going to really crack that [school change] I think it’s the principals that have to be engaged in it. And we’ve seen that in [GISC].” He described that in previous initiatives “we’ve involved the principals early and often; I guess, those are the ones that we see results in. And that makes sense. I think the principal is probably the most important person in the whole school.” Although he reported advocating for the engagement of principals in the Network, according to Michael and others, their participation remained limited. Michael attributed that to the limited flexibility principals have in their workday, stating:

I think from a principal’s perspective, it’s kind of like, you let me know when you’re ready to get something done, then I’ll go to that meeting. And we can work on getting something done and we’ll make it happen. But the 18 meetings that it takes to lead up to that point, I can’t afford to be there.

Michael also identified the pressures of federal and state accountability measures, including new teacher evaluation measures being rolled out in the

state at the time of the study, as limiting the ability of principals and teachers to engage in efforts that are not directly tied to assessments. He conveyed he believed teachers thought, “Not only my kids accountable but me now since my evaluation is tied to this data, to invest that.” He continued, “So, if there’s any sense that this might not contribute value to that, they can’t afford to get involved in it.”

### Discussion

Previous research suggests that rural school leaders play many roles, including boundary-spanning roles in their relationships and collaboration with community members (Miller, 2007; Preston & Barnes, 2017). The spread of school-community partnerships as a means to address complex problems and community development (Henig et al., 2015) in rural places provides new spaces for school leaders to take on boundary-spanning roles. In the Grand Isle Network identified in this study, several school leaders contributed to the development of the regional partnership that brought together eight districts. Each school leader played important roles in the Network, from input on the goals as a founding member to serving as a champion or cheerleader to bring the message of the Network into their district and to the public at large. They also served to amplify the voices of those not frequently heard in these partnerships, specifically youths and low-income parents.

While Miller (2008) identified eight characteristics of boundary-spanning leaders in school partnerships, the school leaders in this study did not necessarily enact all eight. In particular, the degree to which they were able to carry out boundary-spanning leadership depended in part of the flexibility and autonomy available to them in their position. Miller (2007) stated that boundary-spanning leaders are able to move across boundaries when they have the freedom and flexibility to do so and the ability to negotiate institutional constraints. Superintendent Michael explicitly stated that his position provided him with more autonomy to pursue activities he believed would benefit the district. This allowed him to grow his network of professional contacts, particularly through previous collaborative efforts. His broad

professional contacts were evident in how frequently Network members identified him as someone to talk to about the Network. His longevity in his position and broad professional network appear to contribute to his legitimacy as a leader in Winslow, as well as across the Grand Isle region and the state. This legitimacy was also reflected in his selection as a member of the governance council. Likewise, his selection as a speaker at a large public event reflected his position as someone who could mobilize a wide range of community members to a common cause (Miller, 2008) beyond his district. He also served as a champion of disadvantaged students in his district (Miller, 2008), which served the greatest proportion of students qualifying for free and reduced-priced lunch by prioritizing increasing the number of early childhood spaces in his district through partnership efforts and a bond issue to build additional classrooms.

While his position as superintendent afforded him greater freedom and flexibility to pursue boundary-spanning activities (Miller, 2007), Michael explicitly identified the need for principals to be engaged in the Network. In particular, he identified principals as necessary to engage due to their ability to influence change in each school. However, building principals appeared more limited in their ability to engage in boundary-spanning leadership activities due to greater institutional demands on their time (Miller, 2007). Harmon and Schafft (2009) suggest that the pressure of accountability found in No Child Left Behind may limit the ability of school leaders to engage in the work of building partnerships with communities. This appeared to be the case for principals in this study, which was completed during a period of state policy changes to teacher evaluations, increasing the pressure on teachers and building leaders. Principals also appeared constrained by the necessity of being in their buildings during the school day. Network meetings were frequently held during the day, and most often held in the biggest community in which the Big River district was located. This limited the ability of those working in the outlying districts, many of which are 30 miles from Big River, to participate in these meetings.

Unlike principals, after-school director Drew and school board member Mark enjoyed greater

flexibility and autonomy in carrying out their leadership roles. Both of their formal leadership roles required working across organizational and social boundaries, which served them well as members of the Network. For Drew, this included working with a group of out-of-school providers to create a 5-day after-school program in his district, as well as working with a group of providers to engage in quality assessment of programming. In addition to boundary spanning, in his position, he served as a cheerleader for the Network and an amplifier of youth voices both in his school district and in the Network. In this way, Drew engaged in efforts to champion the disadvantaged (Miller, 2008), particularly in the ways he sought out a diverse group of students to engage in action planning. For Mark, he saw his role as a school board member to engage in outreach efforts with community members. His campaign for election as a school board member took him door to door to speak to community members in a way that principals, often tied to their school, could not. In this way, he worked to mobilize community members to a common cause (Miller, 2008) in the form of the Network's pathway.

The findings of the study identify the importance of superintendents engaging in regional, cross-sector school-community partnerships. However, as district superintendent Michael pointed out, principals are key actors in bringing about changes within their schools and need to be connected to these partnerships. Yet the constraints on principals' time, tightened by the increase in teacher evaluation policies that have increased teacher observations since Race to the Top, make engaging in school-community partnerships more challenging for school leaders.

### Conclusion

This study contributes to the knowledge about the boundary-spanning leadership roles rural school leaders can take in regional school-community partnerships. Harmon and Schafft (2009) wrote, "Cultivating collaborative and meaningful school community development will be a hallmark of good public schools that can meet the challenges facing rural communities and their students in the 21st Century" (p. 8). In the Grand Isle Network, school

leaders engaged in various boundary-spanning leadership practices that contributed to the development of the Network. These included conversations among school leaders and members of other organizations in the area, engaging in study trips with Network members, building professional networks, developing legitimacy and trust, mobilizing diverse community members to shared goals, and communicating with others to share information.

The ability of school leaders to engage in boundary-spanning efforts in the Network appeared to be facilitated or constrained by their formal leadership roles. For those leading after-school programs, working across organizational boundaries may already be part of the job. Likewise, school board members are well positioned to span the boundary between community members and district leadership and to empower community members (Van Alfen, 1992). Van Alfen (1992) identified school board members as key leaders in building coalitions and developing linkages among education professionals and all those in the community who have a stake in educating children. This study suggests part of this work of school boards is framing public education as a benefit to all community members, as well as speaking from a place of credibility and legitimacy.

Principals have been described as situated at the “boundary of the school and its environment” (Beabout, 2010, p. 26), and Barley and Beesley (2007) identify the importance of principal leadership across the school and community boundary as contributing to successful rural schools. However, principals in this study appeared significantly constrained when it came to engaging in a regional network across multiple districts. Like previous research, this study suggests rural principals have many demands on their time (Preston et al., 2013). Participants also identified the pressure of federal accountability policies as constraining their participation in boundary-spanning leadership activities. The findings suggest the need for superintendents to engage in buffering activities to decrease the pressure from accountability measures to focus on local goals (Zuckerman, Wilcox, Durand, Schiller, & Lawson, 2018) and to free up time to pursue boundary-

spanning leadership activities that would benefit their schools. This is particularly important as the superintendent identified the importance of bringing principals on at the right time to carryout change in their schools.

In addition to buffering roles, rural superintendents may be better positioned to engage in partnership efforts due to the relative flexibility that comes with their positions. Likewise, superintendents who regularly engage with multiple constituencies may be better equipped to engage in boundary-spanning leadership in these partnerships, including social skills and broad social and professional networks (DeMatthews, Edwards, & Rincones, 2016; Miller et al., 2017). Further, superintendents may bring credibility and legitimacy (Miller, 2008) across the region necessary to mobilize a broad set of community members to the efforts. Additionally, participants identified the need for superintendents to engage in the Network to provide linkages to schools and leadership to align school efforts to the Network’s goals. Participants suggested a need to recruit superintendents to the vision and for superintendents to work closely with board members to pursue activities that align with partnership goals and for superintendents to build capacity of school level leaders to engage in partnership efforts. This capacity could include boundary-spanning leadership skills, particularly in working with low-income parents and students. Developing the capacity of principals to engage in boundary-spanning leadership could contribute to the ability of regional networks to create partnerships that can contribute to concurrent school improvement and community development, as suggested by Schafft (2016).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All names of individuals and places have been replaced with pseudonyms.
- <sup>2</sup> For additional details on the eight school districts, see Zuckerman (2016a).
- <sup>3</sup> Interview protocols available on request.

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### About the Author

**Sarah J. Zuckerman**, PhD, is a former special education teacher and current assistant professor in educational administration at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Her research uses qualitative methods to investigate state-level educational policy implementation and school-community partnerships, particularly in the context of rural communities. Dr. Zuckerman's recent research combines organizational change theory with concepts from political science to understand how individuals, groups, and organizations mobilize and develop shared understandings that shape action at the school, community, and state policy levels. Her current projects include an ethnographic study of statewide policy network in the area of early childhood workforce and a case study of a rural community coalition to support children and families across school and community settings.